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RUEHCP/AMEMBASSY COPENHAGEN PRIORITY 0352
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA PRIORITY 0389
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KATHMANDU 001027

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SUBJECT: UN HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES MEETS WITH CORE
GROUP AMBASSADORS

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty for reasons 1.4(b/d).

Summary

11. (C) On May 23, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Antonio Guterres thanked the Core Group in Kathmandu for paving the way for third-country resettlement of Bhutanese refugees in Nepal. He had observed in his May 22 meetings that the Government of Nepal (GON) had accepted and endorsed a resettlement program. Remaining issues included pressing Bhutan on repatriation and streamlining Nepal's exit permit procedures. Guterres said that further evictions from Bhutan would impact a resettlement program; the GON seemed very worried about this possibility, he added. UNHCR Director for Asia Janet Lim urged the Core Group to keep the spotlight on Bhutan to prevent future expulsions. Guterres and the Core Group agreed that discussion with the GON on local integration of the residual population should wait until Bhutan had made a genuine attempt at repatriation. The GON had stepped up security in the refugee camps, but the fragility of the peace process and actions by the Communist Party of Bhutan remained problematic. The participants briefly discussed the need to find an acceptable mechanism to process the urban refugee caseload in Nepal.

Core Group Meets With HC Guterres

12. (SBU) Local Core Group Chairman and Australian Ambassador Graeme Lade hosted a Core Group meeting May 23 in honor of UN High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres, who arrived in Nepal May 22 for a two-day visit. Ambassador Moriarty (with RefCoord), Norwegian Ambassador Tore Toreng, Danish Charge Stefan Schoenmann, and Canadian Immigration Counselor from New Delhi Trudy Kennington represented the Core Group. UNHCR Resident Representative Abraham Abraham, UNHCR Director for Asia Janet Lim, WFP Resident Representative Richard Ragan, and UNHCR Durable Solutions Officer Kim Roberson

accompanied HC Guterres.

Core Group and HC Guterres Note Progress on Resettlement

13. (SBU) Ambassador Lade acknowledged that Ambassador Moriarty's role using a "big stick" with Prime Minister Koirala had proven effective in obtaining the Government of Nepal's (GON's) agreement to allow third-country resettlement of Bhutanese refugees. Lade restated the Core Group's commitment to continue to push Bhutan hard on repatriation, although he did not believe this was likely in the short term. Following up on the PRM technical visit to Nepal, Lade said he had also pressed the Prime Minister to streamline exit permit procedures. He expressed disappointment that Canberra would not announce a resettlement program until June. The High Commissioner for Refugees expressed appreciation for the Core Group's generosity in offering resettlement to the Bhutanese refugees and the Kathmandu Core Group's activism, which has made resettlement a reality. The U.S. and Canadian resettlement offers, he said, had provided a breakthrough to resolve this problem. Guterres explained that his reason for coming to Nepal was "to make resettlement a fait accompli." From his meetings May 22, he said, it was clear that the GON had fully adopted, and intended to implement, a resettlement policy.

Remaining Issues To Work On

14. (SBU) HC Guterres noted that the GON had wanted his reassurance that the international community would not allow Bhutan off the hook and would continue to press for

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repatriation of eligible refugees. The GON, he said, wanted Bhutan to accept Category 2 (Bhutanese citizens who had voluntarily departed Bhutan) Khudunabari Camp residents for repatriation. Guterres said he had agreed to continue to press Bhutan on this issue. The only other remaining issues involved practical implementation of the resettlement program, such as streamlined exit permit procedures.

UNHCR Concerned About Possible Evictions From Bhutan

15. (C) HC Guterres expressed concern that UNHCR had received disturbing signs that the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB) might evict more Nepali ethnic Lhotsampa. "This would be disastrous," he said. Every GON interlocutor he had met also raised this concern. Guterres indicated that evictions from Bhutan would disrupt the resettlement process. Norwegian Ambassador Toreng recommended that UNHCR and the Core Group increase pressure on the Government of India (GOI) for assurances that Bhutan would not evict residents. UNHCR's Lim agreed that maintaining international attention on Bhutan would be important to prevent future evictions.

Elections in Bhutan - A Precursor To Evictions?

16. (C) While the international community appeared to have accepted that elections would not include all residents of Bhutan, Guterres hoped that the RGOB would not use this as a reason for eviction. The Ambassador noted that the resettlement program might have a magnet effect, particularly if Lhotsampa in Bhutan continued to face discrimination from the RGOB. UNHCR's Roberson agreed that, if people began trickling out of Bhutan, the GON and UNHCR would need to be very careful in making determinations between those forcibly evicted and those who voluntarily departed.

Bhutan Will Continue to Need Foreign Workers

17. (C) Canadian Immigration Counselor from New Delhi Trudy

Kennington said that, in a recent training program conducted by the Canadian government for RGOB customs and immigration officials, the RGOB had clearly been more concerned about keeping illegal Indians and Nepalese out of the country than facilitating legal cross-border travel and trade. Noting the need for unskilled labor in Bhutan, Guterres believed the RGOB's focus would be like that of the Gulf states; Bhutan would try to bring in foreign workers from as far away as possible, rather than from nearby areas of South Asia. The RGOB believed it would be easier to "control" workers from far away, he added.

Discussion of Local Integration Can Wait

18. (C) HC Guterres did not intend to discuss local integration with the GON during his visit. "This is a sure way to scuttle a productive discussion with the Nepalese," he said. Guterres anticipated that the GON would become more receptive to local integration once the RGOB had demonstrated its commitment to repatriate eligible refugees. UNHCR was able to discuss local integration in terms of certain refugees' family ties, but no more than that at this time. Ambassador Lade pointed out that visiting EU Parliamentarian Nina Gill had said earlier that, as the refugee population was reduced, donor assistance could be targeted to local Nepalese communities as an incentive for local integration. Lim suggested that, after a residual population was identified, India might come forward to serve as a place to reunite refugees with their families who remained inside Bhutan.

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Communist Activities and Fragility of the Peace Process

19. (C) In his meetings with the GON, HC Guterres said that the GON had "minimized" his concerns about Communist Party of Bhutan (CPB) activities in the camps. Abraham reported that UNHCR had constructed police posts in all seven refugee camps while the Home Ministry had assigned police officers to each post. The Ambassador indicated that, with U.S. immigration officials conducting interviews in and near the refugee camps, the Embassy may sign a Memorandum of Understanding with the GON on additional deployment of security forces. Guterres said he was troubled by the fragility of the current situation in Nepal and encouraged Core Group members to do everything possible to convince the CPB that a truly democratic, nonviolent movement in Bhutan was the only option. India could also play a more relevant role on this issue, Guterres opined.

Urban Refugees in Nepal

110. (SBU) Guterres said he had raised the problem of urban refugees in Nepal with Foreign Minister Sahana Pradhan on May 122. They had agreed that UNHCR would sit down with Foreign and Home Ministry officials to hammer out an acceptable mechanism for making Refugee Status Determinations (RSDs) in the case of urban asylum seekers. UNHCR would prefer the GON to make its own RSDs, but if it refused to do so, UNHCR would carry out its mandate in this regard. The Ambassador noted that he had raised this issue with the Home Minister recently and had requested the Cabinet to waive the visa overstay fines of those accepted for U.S. resettlement. He added that the ability to obtain visas upon arrival at the airport in Kathmandu likely contributed to the problem of urban refugees in Nepal.

Comment

111. (C) HC Guterres raised two valid concerns that could have a serious impact on the resettlement program: the possibility

of future evictions from Bhutan and the fragile peace process in Nepal. To accurately assess whether the RGOB is evicting residents, the GON would need to re-open its refugee screening post. Currently, the GON is simply turning away potential Bhutanese asylum seekers at the Nepal-Indian border. The activities of the Communist Party of Bhutan, if they continue unchecked, could raise problems of material support with this refugee population. We will continue to press the GON to improve law and order in and around the refugee camps.

MORIARTY